
SHALLOW

A FLASH FICTION COLLECTION

BY DAVID SHUTE

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The Twelfth Step

It was an exercise riddling over the conflict. An exercise better accompanied by vodka, tobacco, and the solitude of early morning. Solitude at a time before the sun woke and the day intruded on silence. It made little sense that he could so willingly wear the woman through and be so terrified to share her bed.

A cigarette passed along with another deep drink to further confuse the issue.

The real peace came from the balcony paces away. It offered a focus allowing one to empty the mind of all thoughts and be content in the simplicity of the world. She was proud of the balcony above all. The street seven floors below in a neighbourhood still tragically trendy enough to encourage the tragically trendy to take up residence. Above it, a clear night sky begging to be searched over for every prick of light it offered. Solace it would offer, but very little.

A drag and a drink.

Taking up at her side beneath the covers was suffocating at the thought alone. Their lives had been little more than misery inflicted at each others hands for the past five years. Liquor always bringing them together and driving them apart. Passion existing only in the extremes.

Swimming, nearly sick with vodka, the answer came. It was time, finally, to leave her instead of the reverse. All that remained was action to realize intention.

A drag.

His cigarette finished, it sailed through the balcony door with a flick and off in to nothingness. The sight was mesmerizing and invited the bottle to follow. The same result this time providing a distant, satisfying crash from the street below. There was no recourse, it's beauty and finality would be perfect.

Nine to the balcony, an additional two to the railing, and a twelfth step to freedom.

Insomniac's Handguide

Preface

I used to love the shadows. I'd go without sleep just to play with them. I'd always been told they were sleep deprivation induced hallucinations. I used to agree.

Day One

It consists of fatigue and little more. Day one is always the hardest barrier to break through. The daily routine is so ingrained that most people falter at this point and fail to even glimpse them. It's understandable why. They aren't ready to play just yet. You haven't earned their attention or given them an adequate playground to hang from.

Day Two

This is usually where most people start to experience movement in shadows. They play at the periphery. Always just out of view. A quick turn of the head or as you blink. The moment you focus they're gone.

Day Three

They move steadily toward the middle. Abstract and fleeting, like rats. I affectionately called them skitters previously. Tiny black shapes darting around just out of immediate view and direct concentration. Playfully making a dash through the middle when your focus waivers.

Day Four

Abandoning indistinct movements they take form, though the forms change as time goes on. They act real. I'd always had difficulty passing day four. After a couple hours of sleep they always went away.

Day Five

If you can push through they perform. Anything and everything they can to keep your attention. The fifth day is quite easy to get through. There is no lack of things to be entertained by. I imagine for someone looking in you might seem a little mad smiling at empty shadows.

Day Six

The performance is over. They frenzy.

Day Seven

I can't tell you what would happen next. I didn't make it to day seven. I can't imagine it gets any worse. In terror I finally slept on day six.

They didn't go away.

They won't go away.

They're always in the shadows. I see them everywhere. In darkened alleyways, under cars in the street, in my own shadow.

They're everywhere.

They show me things I've never imagined. Horrible things.

I would lay baking in the desert at noon to make them go away, to take away the shadows they haunt me in. It wouldn't matter. Every blink provides them with darkness to torment me in.

The Used

The sobbing mass across from me is tiresome. His need to whine is turning my stomach. Worse, this is my third go round suffering this display. Although I can't voice why, I'm grateful this will be the last time.

I have the answers he's looking for but that's not why I'm here. He doesn't need to hear me tell him why she's left him, again. He doesn't need me to fill in the gaps of where he was lacking for her. I can't tell him where she'd gone or why she'd never be back again. Instead, I'm forced to nod and feign sympathy.

He's such a mess when he's been drinking. He clings to the same three or four ideas and regurgitates them in a cycle ending in either passing out or puking and then passing out. I'm happy to keep his glass full if it will add expediency to the process.

In a rare turn he changes gears and my apathy turns to seething rage. I want to twist his fucking head off and bring it to her. I'm disgusted that he confesses to wanting nothing more than a glimpse inside her head. Like there's anything worth seeing in there anymore.

He gives up the tangent and settles for a quivering bottom lip in its place. The words burn at the back of my throat in the lull. It's entirely his fault. Not through action or inaction, merely in having her around at all. She was flawed and weak. She was a sheep in wolf's clothing pretending to be self reliant while willing to bleed for the approval, the affection, of others. I took more pleasure than I perhaps should have in watching her bleed for my approval.

When is she coming back?

I can't fault him for asking. Twice previously she left and twice previously she returned. Cowed by each experience he laid down both times, a door mat to properly welcome her home. No doubt his current grief at her disappearance was softened by his resolve that she would return.

Not this time. She would not be coming back. After the things she allowed me to do to her she would never be able show her face around here again. After the things she begged me not to do she'd never feign her interest or love again.

Mainline

They oozed sickness. Everyone of them. It bled from their every pore. I listened to their disease as it was sneezed, coughed, sniffled, and mumbled. As they did so they furthered its will. Unwittingly they were victim to some infection or another anxious to tread new ground. Unwittingly they were victim to each other, packed three deep as they were. Unwittingly I was their victim, packed three deep as I was.

I hate this ritual. It makes me nauseous. My reward every morning for not dying in my sleep the night prior.

The man in the hat, his hideous tweed suit and red rimmed nose, could only be the worst perpetrator. And so painfully close. So close as to be fixed on the trembling hairs inside those red rimmed nostrils. Vibrating with each inhale and abandoning their dance in a momentary break as he coaxed the will forward to wheeze out stale air. A few inches of breathing room would be a godsend. I can feel the protest churning at the back of my throat, bile and vulgarities bubbling over. Some of it would be a condemnation surely, but the majority would be a simple plea. A moment, an inch, a place to breath without inhaling the sickness surrounding me. Even this close a scream would be pointless. Even this close the wailing infant in the back would surely drown me out. Even this close his, or possibly her, pain would be a more compelling argument to entertain.

Even this close they continued to whisper in hushed tones blankly plotting. Little to be discerned over the noise of the train, over the noise of the track, over the noise of their whistling breaths and mumbles. Forced association with parasites. Forced to live the same disease. Forced to maintain this plastic wrapped reality.

Why are they so close? They weigh so much for being hollow. Standing on my heels, bumping shoulder and hip, hands lightly grazing against each other on the pole. Jesus, I had forgotten the pole. If it wasnt necessary to prevent from falling deeper in to them Id release the filthy thing.

Perhaps this is the train to perdition. Sharing space with those who spat in the hand of God. Only fitting their course be the most uncomfortable mass transit conceived. Pressed upon each other, perhaps to suffocate and dispatch the weakest. A few extra minutes of air for those that suffer on without them. Disassociated hands, roaming freely from their masters, touching and prodding. Groping whatever they find in their path, perhaps seeking a

naughty bit to pull a quick thrill from. One of my naughty bits maybe.

I need off. I need away from these people. I need to look away from the red rimmed nostrils and their quivering hairs. He must have felt my gaze. They all must have. Inspecting them. Judging them. They knew and looked away so I would not see their desire. Their need to crush me, to suffocate me, to fondle me, to take what little I have of value. I need off. I don't care where we are. I am leaving. Now.

Fresh air. Only two stops from work. Better than most days.

With The Flies

Four crackers, each with a smear of peanut butter. He wasn't partial to the heavily sugared, overly processed fare from the market shelves. Worse were the natural brands, requiring a paint shaker to reintegrate should the contents separate after being left idle for more than five minutes. Four crackers, each coated with a simple recipe his mother had passed to him only a few years earlier. A gift given during the brief time they had passed beyond their differences and reconciled. During the time shortly before she, herself, had passed.

It was the recipe he had grown with. One of the few steady fixtures from early childhood to early adulthood. Regardless of the meal prepared for breakfast there would always be four crackers, each with a smear of peanut butter. A ritual he sorely missed when the old woman sold their home and disappeared within walls owned by another man. She didn't flee to be with anyone of great importance. He was simply the man she used to replace his long dead father. In turn she one day fled from this home as well and back to her son. Arms extended in apology.

His forgiveness was easily forthcoming. He had only one thing truly required for it; the recipe. The previous years were marked by hollow mornings in the absence of routine. All she need is grant that one favour and he would happily forgive all transgressions. Her eyes briefly narrowed at the request but she provided without commentary before they parted that day. She left abruptly citing chores needing closure before an upcoming vacation. They would, of course, reconnect when she returned.

He immediately purchased crackers and the appropriate ingredients. The crackers were a necessity as he had not stocked them in his cupboard since repeated experiments failed to yield a suitable replacement in his mother's absence. The batch made that night was exactly prepared and immediately set aside. Temptation was never a consideration, not even a taste. Ritual would make it more rewarding come morning.

It was everything he had hoped. That morning and the next he was provided two perfect starts to two perfect days. On the third morning the first fly arrived. More followed. Within three more mornings he no longer wanted to enter his kitchen, pushed back by the wall of flies within.

As his hunger grew in direct proportion to the expanding mass of flies in his kitchen his patience grew shorter. He screamed at a girl who came to

his door, not that he could remember why he had screamed at her or what exactly what it was she was selling. His heel found the jaw of a transient that, in his estimation, likely should have remained silent. Then came the woman in the parking garage.

Chattering on her cellphone and snapping her gum while her heels were clicking clicking clicking on the concrete beneath her feet and echoing off every surface in a cacophony ringing in his ears and tickling his spine.

He had been alarmed at the clear gap in his memory as he pulled his bloodied fist back from her lifeless face. Perched over top of her with his other hand gripped at the collar of her shirt the preceding moments filled themselves in. At some point she'd stopped screaming. Shortly after she stopped breathing.

He held in silence, hand still clenching her shirt, until it was broken by the rumbling of his stomach. The rumble accompanied a fly attracted to the quickly drying mash that remained of the woman's face. Followed by another and then another. He stumbled back as the flies multiplied with his every step. First a dozen to a hundred, then a hundred to a humming cloud. He turned from the swarm and ran.

Still vibrating from the moment he went immediately to the kitchen on arriving home.

Not a fly to be found. Still, he chose not eat.

A chef's knife from the block in hand, he exited the kitchen with a mind for his mother. His hunger would need to be gnawing at his stomach and the cellphone woman's blood still dried to his knuckles when she returned. A fire to purpose the blade he was bringing her.

The smell greeted him first. It was easy to follow back to the chair she was slumped over in. There had been no vacation, he surmised. Likely she'd come home the night she had seen him and ingested something to quietly conclude. He wondered if she knew what she had given him in addition to the recipe. Did she know whether he would learn how to send the flies away? Did she leave to be one with the flies?

He still loves her the same and thinks of her every morning as he lays out his breakfast. This morning like every other. Four crackers, each with a smear of peanut butter. Today, as has happened many times now, brings one with a fly.